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Introduction

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I. INTRODUCTION

When scepticism about the state of the English novel in the 1950s and early 60s reached the point when some critics were burying the novel as a spent form, Iris Murdoch had already joined the undiminishing numbers of English novelists to prove the opposite – that the novel was very much alive and well.

Starting within the realistic tradition together with John Wain and Kingsley Amis in the mid 50s, Murdoch soon began to baffle easy classification as her rich blend of serious moral concerns, playfulness of form despite her continual commitment to the traditional novel, and exuberant inventiveness gave her novels a uniquely Murdochian hallmark. Murdoch's multifaceted novels have always enjoyed both popular success and high critical acclaim and have earned their author a permanent place in the mainstream of English literature. The work of Iris Murdoch reflects the battles and development of both novel writing and social attitudes to moral issues of the decades since the Second World War, which makes her as much a writer of our time as her broader moral concerns make her work timeless. Some similarity of interests and gravity of thought rank her alongside William Golding, Anthony Burgess and Muriel Spark, whose work also covers the same time span.

Of novelists now writing Iris Murdoch is probably the most prolific and her 24 novels to date have been followed by a creditable number of critical studies major and minor which classify them as philosophical, symbolist, novels of ideas, moralist, didactic, realistic, fantastic, Gothic and allegorical. Adverse comment has mostly centred around alleged artificiality and the creating of patterns. Criticism of Iris Murdoch's novels has mostly focused on the characters, the form and the emerging patterns, her elusive symbolism and, in broader terms, her moral concerns and realism. Human relationships, which I consider central to Murdoch's novels, have received comparatively little critical attention apart from by-the-way references in character analyses. I believe that the vast range of relationships in the novels is neither a by-product of the characters nor a mere product of her elaborate plots but that the varied human relationships are conscious, serious studies in their own right.

It is not my intention to attach yet another label to Iris Murdoch and classify her work as the novel of human relationships. Nor do I want to superimpose a grid on the canvass of relationships to map out yet more patterns. The aim of my study is to trace the seemingly recurrent kinds of relationships in broad outlines and show how multifarious they really are. This is where the author's concept of contingency is best employed and illustrated and where her realism is at its most real.

I want to concentrate on five areas of relationships that underlie some of the concepts and concerns debated in Murdoch's novels: the artist-saint relationships, power relationships, incestuous relationships, relationships where a symbol constitutes a bond between individuals and love relationships as attention to otherness. Each of the relationships will be dealt with in a chapter which will pose the dominant questions in the discourse followed by an attempt to trace the development of the theme chronologically across the novels where it appears with some prominence.

It is surprising and sad to note that Iris Murdoch is little known in the Czech Republic. I have therefore found it useful to precede my analysis with a brief survey of her novels highlighting their main ideas and the issuing criticism over the decades. Another chapter will be devoted to Murdoch's work as it has appeared in Czech translation, in Czech reviews and studies of English literature.